PARH	parh12417	**Dispatch:** January 2, 2019	**CE:** XXX
Journal	**MSP No.**	**No. of pages:** 14	**PE:** XXXX

St Stephen's in War and Peace: Civil Defence and the Location of Parliament, 1938–51

MILES TAYLOR

This essay takes a new look at the destruction and the rebuilding of the house of commons during the 1940s. It argues that behind the home front bravado of the Palace of Westminster steadfastly enduring the blitz lay secret plans for rehousing MPs away from aerial bombardment, contingency scenarios that were then updated after 1945 in the event of attack on London by atomic weapons. The essay also suggests that threats to the security of parliament, together with the necessity to rebuild the Commons, were turned by the coalition government into an opportunity to refashion parliamentary politics in such a way that the two-party system was restored, along the traditional lines of government and opposition that had become blurred since 1931.

Keywords: BBC; civil defence; Giles Gilbert Scott; house of commons; house of lords; Palace of Westminster; parliamentary reporting; Second World War; serjeant-at-arms; Winston Churchill

1

'We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us'. So declared Winston Churchill in October 1943, as he introduced plans to reconstruct the chamber of the house of commons, destroyed during the blitz of 1941, as an accurate replica of Charles Barry's gothic masterpiece. It would be oblong and not semicircular, Churchill explained, and it would be small, with fewer seats than there were MPs. In this way, the spatial requirements for parliamentary government after the war – when, as Churchill later put it, 'fury and faction and full vent will be given to the greatest passions' – would be reinstated.[1] In 1944, Giles Gilbert Scott, doyen of the late gothic style and scourge of modernism (perhaps unfairly so) was appointed to design the refurbished building. Five years and £1.75 million later, the new Commons chamber was opened, looking to all intents and purposes like its Victorian predecessor, which itself had aped the original medieval chapel of St Stephen's out of which the modern Palace of Westminster was wrought across the centuries.[2] As the country emerged from the Second World War into austerity and reconstruction, the restoration of parliament, with materials drawn from the four corners of the commonwealth, served as a vital tonic to the nation, a reminder of continuity and durability in an age of uncertainty.

[1] Hansard, *Commons Debates*, 5th ser., cccxciii, col. 403: 28 Oct. 1943; cdvii, col. 1006: 25 Jan. 1945.

[2] Gavin Stamp, '"We Shape Our Buildings and Afterwards Our Buildings Shape Us": Sir Giles Gilbert Scott and the Rebuilding of the House of Commons', in *The Houses of Parliament: History, Art, Architecture*, ed. Christine Riding and Jacqueline Riding (2000), 149–60; Maurice Hastings, *Parliament House: The Chambers of the House of Commons* (1950), 185–92.

Except that during the Second World War and its aftermath, there was very little continuity in the alternative accommodation provided for the house of commons. Churchill himself delivered those famous speeches defending the sacrosanct layout of the Commons in the chamber of the house of lords, where MPs sat for the duration of the war and throughout almost all of Clement Attlee's Labour government of 1945–50. During the blitz, the Commons actually spent nearly 50 days around the corner from the Palace of Westminster, meeting in Church House, next to Westminster Abbey.[3] Moreover, both before and after the war, extensive civil defence planning was carried out, with a view to relocating parliament altogether to completely new locations, which featured very different speaking chambers. Emergency schemes for moving the Commons were also hatched after 1945 in peacetime, although they have escaped the attention of watchers of Whitehall during the early cold war.[4] Nor was this an era dominated by party 'faction' in the way championed by Churchill. Between the formation of the 'National' government in 1931 and the general election of 1945, the conventions of two-party politics were challenged by the coalition government and an effervescence of independent MPs and minor parties contesting and, on occasion, winning elections. Indeed, during the Second World War itself there was a marked swing against the two-party system, symbolised by the emergence of Common Wealth led by the ex-Liberal MP, Richard Acland, and via the airwaves by the writer, J.B. Priestley.[5] Seen in this context, Churchill's comments were uttered out of hope as much as out of conviction, a wishful assertion that the norms of bipartisanship would be re-established once the Commons had been rebuilt along traditional lines.

This essay takes a second look at the destruction and the rebuilding of the house of commons during the 1940s. It suggests that the home front bravado – the Churchillian rhetoric of parliament enduring the blitz – masks the fact that, from as early as 1938, there were secret plans for rehousing MPs away from aerial bombardment, contingency scenarios that were then updated after 1945 in the event of attack on London by atomic weapons. The essay also argues that the threat to the home of democracy, and the necessity to rebuild the Commons, was turned by the coalition government into an opportunity to refashion parliamentary politics in such a way that the two-party system was restored, along the old lines of government and opposition. What follows is in three parts. First, there is an account of the relocation of the houses of parliament during wartime, both what was planned and

[3]Jennifer Tanfield, *In Parliament, 1939–50: The Effect of the War on the Palace of Westminster* (House of Commons Library Document no. 20, 1991), ch. 4.

[4]Peter Hennessy, '"Inescapable, Necessary and Lunatic": Whitehall's Transition-to-War Planning for the Third World War', *20th Century British History*, xxi (2010), 206–24; Peter Hennessy, *The Secret State: Preparing for the Worst 1945–2010* (2010 edn); Matthew Grant, *After the Bomb: Civil Defence and Nuclear War in Cold War Britain, 1945–68* (2010); Daniel Lomas, *Intelligence, Security and the Attlee Governments, 1945–51: An Uneasy Relationship?* (Manchester, 2017).

[5]On the 1930s, see Nick Smart, *The National Government, 1931–40* (Basingstoke, 1999); Geoffrey Fry, *The Politics of Crisis: An Interpretation of British Politics, 1931–1945* (Basingstoke, 2001), ch. 2. On the Second World War, see Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain, 1939–45* (1969), 546–51; John T. Callaghan, 'Common Wealth and the Communist Party and the 1945 General Election', *Contemporary Record*, ix (1995), 62–79; Steven Fielding, 'The Second World War and Popular Radicalism: The Significance of the "Movement Away From Party"', *History*, lxxx (1995), 38–58; Paul Addison, 'By-Elections of the Second World War', in *By-Elections in British Politics*, ed. Chris Cook and John Ramsden (1997 edn), 130–50; Kevin Morgan, 'Away from Party and into "the Party": British Wartime Communism and the 1945 Election', *Socialist History*, xxxvii (2010), 73–95; Kristopher Lovell, 'The "Common Wealth Circus": Popular Politics and the Popular Press in Wartime Britain, 1941–1945', *Media History*, xxiii (2017), 427–50.

what actually took place during 1941, a narrative that draws on the hitherto unused papers of the Commons' serjeants-at-arms. Then, the analysis turns to the debates around what form of assembly might replace the blitzed chamber, looking in particular at the work of the select committee of 1943–4. Finally, the essay describes Scott's new house of commons, which eventually opened for business in October 1950, how it combined reverence for Barry's gothic ornamentalism, with a series of technological and architectural innovations that ensured that parliamentary government could function in a modern age.

2. *Destruction*

The oldest parts of the Palace of Westminster were among the first to be hit in the blitz that raged during the Battle of Britain in 1940–1. There was just collateral damage at first, from the river and from around the abbey. Then, on 26 September 1940, Old Palace Yard was hit, with a crater 30ft wide left, and St Stephen's porch damaged. Worse was to come during the winter. On 8 December, Cloister Court and the nearby clerks' offices were bombed, the floor of St Stephen's crypt broken up, and the Commons' lobby struck by falling masonry. Several months later, on 17 April, there was a third major strike, affecting the same vicinity of the palace. Finally, on the night of Saturday, 10 May 1941, the Luftwaffe took out the Commons chamber, and most of the surrounding complex of rooms and lobbies. There were 12 separate hits, thought at the time to be deliberate.[6] A few days afterwards, Winston Churchill, the prime minister, inspected the destruction, an iconic image caught for posterity in a photograph published later that month. Little of the famous debating chamber, nicknamed 'St Stephens' in Victorian times, remained intact. Only the gents' toilets in the 'aye' division lobby were left, as well as the reporters' gallery and, ironically, the ladies' 'grille', from where women visitors had been permitted to view proceedings, and to which suffragettes chained themselves in 1908. The Bible from the Speaker's table also survived unscathed.[7]

The air raids over the palace were not unexpected. Everyone knew that the seat of government and the home of the legislature were prime targets. From September 1939, the sittings of parliament commenced in the morning and concluded in daylight to lessen the risk of loss of life. On taking over the government in May 1940, Churchill insisted that this schedule be kept secret lest they wished suddenly to have hundreds of by-elections on their hands. MPs and parliamentary staff took turns as lookouts as night-time at the palace was turned over to scanning the skies for attack.[8] Fortunately, parliament was never

[6]For the precise locations, see the bomb maps held by the Westminster City Archives, available at *http://www.westendatwar.org.uk/page_id__110_path__0p28p.aspx* (accessed 19 Sept. 2016); cf. Parliamentary Archives [hereafter cited as PA], HL/PO/LB/1/87–8: 'Account of the damage done to the Palace of Westminster during the years 1939–41'; Tanfield, *In Parliament*, ch. 3; Bryan Fell, *The Houses of Parliament: A Short Guide to the Palace of Westminster* (1950), 34, claimed the raid was not deliberate.

[7]*Illustrated London News*, 17 May 1941, p. 641. Hugh Dalton, minister for economic warfare in Churchill's coalition, concluded his inspection of the damage by relieving himself in the 'aye' lobby toilets: *The Second World War Diary of Hugh Dalton, 1940–45*, ed. Ben Pimlott (1986), 202: entry for 12 May 1941. The ladies' grille is clearly visible in two depictions of the destruction: John Piper, 'House of Commons 1941', Parliamentary Art Collection, WOA 496; Frank Beresford, 'Demolition of the Blitzed House of Commons', (1945), Parliamentary Art Collection, WOA 184.

[8]Alfred C. Bossom, *Our House: An Introduction to Parliamentary Procedure* (1948), 185; Tanfield, *In Parliament*, 7; *Back-Bencher and Chairman: Some Parliamentary Reminiscences of Lord Hemingford, P.C. KBE* (1946), 220–1.

actually meeting at a time of a direct hit, which was just as well as there was nowhere in the immediate vicinity that offered shelter. The cellars were too cluttered and, anyway, too vulnerable. None the less, in much the same way as the royal family could 'look London in the eye' by staying put during the blitz, so, too, parliament primed the pump of patriotism by carrying on at Westminster when under fire. At the beginning of September 1939, the government chief whip, David Margessen, had assured the Commons that parliament would continue to meet in the capital, to boost the morale of the nation. As Churchill himself put it in another context in June 1940 (referring to Dunkirk), 'wars are never won by evacuation'.[9] In fact, by then, evacuation planning for parliament was already underway.

A short-term refuge for the house of commons was found, first, seven miles away in Willesden. Opposite the bunker in Brook Road, Dollis Hill, purpose-built in 1939 for a wartime government, was Willesden Technical College, opened in 1934. In December 1938, Edward Fitzroy, Speaker of the house of commons, signed off on plans to evacuate the Commons to the college. The college's assembly and dining hall was earmarked for the Commons chamber, with classrooms and laboratories allocated for committee rooms and offices. Houses in nearby streets were identified for billeting up to 650 MPs and Commons' staff. Lists were prepared of essential items to be taken too: Hansard, current blue books and the *Commons Journal*, procedural manuals, minute books for Commons' committees, various accounts and ledgers, five days' supply of stationery, 5,000 towels, and, more ominously, Edwin Pratt's study of railways in the First World War, Edward Lloyd's *Experiments in State Control*, and Josiah Stamp's *Taxation During the War*.[10] After all, even in emergency, the Speaker needed to turn to precedent.

Willesden only offered a temporary solution, however. Starting in the spring of 1939, a much grander scheme of evacuation developed covertly, overseen by Ivor Hughes, the deputy serjeant-at-arms of the house of commons, in conjunction with Edward de Normann from the ministry of works, and officials from the treasury. This move would have taken both houses of parliament to Stratford-upon-Avon, code-named 'HK', and nicknamed, like something out of H.G. Wells, 'The Destination'. This full evacuation of parliament was associated with the government's decision to transfer as much of the civil service out of London as possible, the so called 'Yellow Move', two-thirds completed by June 1940.[11] In this plan the Commons would have assembled in the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, on the banks of the Avon, an art deco building completed in 1932, replacing the original theatre destroyed by fire six years earlier. The theatre of parliament would literally become parliament in a theatre. Or not quite. For the auditorium was proposed as the Commons chamber, with the parliamentary reporters seated on the stage, and the Commons' Speaker and his clerks seated at their table on the forestage. Seats in the dress circle were given over to 'strangers' or visitors. Offstage, the theatre's star dressing rooms were allocated to the prime minister and the whips, with Attlee having to make do with the theatre manager's bedroom for an office. Schedules were drawn up to accommodate

[9] Hansard, *Commons Debates*, 5th ser., cccli, cols 363–4: 3 Sept. 1939.

[10] PA, HC/SA/SJ/13/9: 'Evacuation scheme 1'. The books referred to were: Edwin A. Pratt, *British Railways and the Great War: Organisation, Efforts, Difficulties and Achievements* (2 vols, 1921); E.M.H. Lloyd, *Experiments in State Control at the War Office and the Ministry of Food* (1924); Josiah Stamp, *Taxation During the War* (1932).

[11] Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle: Civilian Morale in Britain during the Second World War* (Manchester, 2013), 33; Brett Holman, *The Next War in the Air Britain's Fear of the Bomber, 1908–1941* (Farnham, 2014), 236–7.

MPs and parliamentary staff in local hotels and homes, the billeting co-ordinated by the whips.[12] The level of detail to which de Normann and Thomas went in planning the evacuation was impressive. MPs, peers and palace staff were issued with special labels for their luggage; reporting centres and pick-up points were organised to ensure that everyone was ready to move in an emergency, whether they were present in parliament or not when the bombs fell; and two special trains were prepared to leave from Paddington.[13] 'Unto the breach' of modern warfare the nation might go, but parliament would be ensconced far away in the heart of old England. As the war commenced in September 1939, *The Times*'s parliamentary correspondent expected this evacuation to happen within days. Throughout that autumn everyone kept their bags packed and ready, recalled Guy Eden, the *Daily Express*'s man at Westminster.[14] The move to 'HK' – to Stratford – never happened, although the theatre remained mothballed for most of the war just in case, actors only returning to the stage to mark the bard's birthday, inevitably, with a performance of Henry V.[15]

The first nine months of the Second World War proved to be a phoney war on the home front, with no sign of the anticipated all-out attack from enemy aircraft on London and other cities. When the first air raids came over London towards the end of the summer of 1940, Churchill wrote a memorandum setting out options for moving parliament, leaving the arrangements to Lord Beaverbrook, minister of aircraft production. By October, a new emergency venue for parliament had been identified: Church House, the meeting place of the Church of England Synod and headquarters for its principal councils and committees. Its secretary, Frank Partridge, the bishop of Portsmouth, initially suggested that Church House be made available, according to John Colville, to the war cabinet. But, soon after, Churchill and various parliamentary officials toured the site and, with their customary gusto, Thomas and de Normann set to requisitioning its rooms for parliamentary, instead of ecclesiastical, purposes.[16] Church House was a good choice. It was nearby: a brisk five minutes' walk away; it was modern to the point of pristine, having only been opened for use in June 1940; and it boasted a large assembly room, of the circular kind, the one unloved by British parliamentarians. Church House was the work of Herbert Baker, the prolific architect responsible, among many commissions, for government buildings in South Africa and, with Edwin Lutyens, in New Delhi in India, where he had designed the semicircular chamber of the new Parliament House. Baker was proud of the new Assembly Hall, describing, in the brochure published to mark the opening of Church House, how it had been specially adapted to enhance the acoustics and guarantee the audibility of all who spoke there.[17]

[12] PA, HC/SA/SJ/13/9: 'Allocation of accommodation'.

[13] PA, HC/SA/SJ/13/11: 'Meeting of whips in the Speaker's Library', 17 July 1939; 'Conference on evacuation held in Serjeant at Arms' room', 18 Apr. 1940.

[14] Arthur Baker, *The House is Sitting* (1958), 77–8; Guy Eden, *Portrait of Churchill* (1945), 65.

[15] *The Times*, 26 Apr. 1943, p. 8.

[16] Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill. Vol. VI: Finest Hour, 1939–41* (1983), 860; John Colville, *The Fringes of Power: Downing Street Diaries, 1939–1955* (1985), 202: entry for 16 Sept. 1940; *Back-Bencher and Chairman*, 217–18.

[17] For Baker, see Daniel M. Abramson, 'Baker, Sir Herbert (1862–1946)', *ODNB*; Thomas Metcalf, 'Architecture and Empire: Sir Herbert Baker and the Building of New Delhi', in Thomas Metcalf, *Forging the Raj: Essays on British India in the Heyday of Empire* (Oxford, 2006), 140–51; Roderick Gradridge, 'Baker and Lutyens in South Africa, or, the Road to Bakerloo', in *Lutyens Abroad: The Work of Sir Edwin Lutyens Outside the British Isles*, ed.

However, no one ever did. On 14 October 1940, Church House itself was partially affected by damage done by a bomb which hit adjacent buildings in Dean's Yard. The Assembly Hall suffered the most; its ceiling collapsed and a large crack was made in its perimeter wall. The air raid proved two things. That this modern building was reasonably robust and fit for occupation, and that MPs would be unable to step inside its semicircular Assembly Hall. Instead, the 'Hoare Memorial Hall', a rectangular room with its own gallery, across the way from the Assembly Hall, was hurriedly prepared for occupation by the Commons, with a smaller room, the 'Convocation Hall', at the opposite end of the building reserved for the Lords. Churchill thanked Partridge for the loan of Church House and, in November, the king opened parliament in the 'Convocation Hall', looking out on a room that, in its essential dimensions, appeared much the same as the chamber of the house of lords.[18] Had the Luftwaffe not intervened, the king might have been addressing a parliament in the round.

In total, the Commons spent 49 days meeting in Church House, or the 'annexe' to give its *nom de guerre*. The sojourn came in two phases. Six days at the end of 1940 and 19 during May and June 1941 at the height of the blitz. Then, at the beginning of 1943, when the danger from the air seemed to recede, the building was given over to the ministry of aviation, before coming back into parliamentary use during the summer of 1944, when 'flying bombs' (the V1 guided missile) began to plague London and the south-east of the country.[19] For four weeks in 1944, Church House became a home from home for the Commons. The latter stages of debates over the coalition's Education Bill, and most of the discussion of the Town and Country Planning Bill, took place there. Not without irony perhaps. These were secular measures enacted in a holy place. The former provided for collective christian worship in all state schools, but gave parents the right for their children to opt out. The latter granted local authorities new powers of compulsory purchase over church property.

Church House was never intended as anything other than a last resort for parliament. Its cellars offered security from enemy bombs that was not available in the Palace of Westminster.[20] However, most MPs and peers did prefer to remain by the river. Although the Commons chamber was wiped out in May 1941, the rest of the precincts of parliament remained relatively undamaged. Alternative spaces for the Commons were thus near at hand. St Stephen's Chapel, reconstructed by Charles Barry as a lavishly decorated hall, was suggested as one possibility for a temporary meeting place for MPs, the idea put forward by Walter Elliott, the former secretary of state for Scotland. Churchill rejected that notion, preferring the royal gallery, perhaps inspired by Daniel Maclise's paintings of the British at war with Napoleon adorning its walls.[21] Some MPs looked, instead, to the house of lords, partly affected by the May bombardment but in working order. Symbolically perhaps, the

Andrew Hopkins and Gavin Stamp (2002), 147–58; Herbert Baker, *Church House: Its Art and Symbolism* (1940), 10.

[18] PA, HC/SA/SJ/14/14: 'Notes of a meeting 28 October 1940'; Churchill Archive Centre, Churchill College Cambridge, Chartwell Papers, CHAR 20/2A/99: Churchill to the bishop of Portsmouth, 13 Nov. 1940; R.J. Craven, *The Church House Westminster 1888–1988* (1988), 20.

[19] PA, HC/SA/SJ/13/14: John Anderson to the Speaker, 30 Dec. 1942; 'Move to Church House', 20 June 1944.

[20] PA, HC/SA/SJ/13/14: 'Church House Civil Defence', 5 July 1944.

[21] *Harold Nicolson. Diaries and Letters, 1939–1945*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (1967), 165–6: entry for 14 May 1941.

stained-glass windows in the Lords, depicting the kings and queens of England and Scotland, had been shattered to bits, although all the statuettes of the nobles who signed the Magna Carta were undamaged. The chamber was duly offered up by Churchill's friend and cabinet colleague, Lord Moyne, then doubling up as leader of the Lords.[22] The Lords was made good for the new occupants. The lord chancellor's woolsack was removed, and the Commons' Speaker's table and chair put in its place. The throne was taken away, too, and the dais covered with a curtain. And so the Commons nudged aside the Lords, which moved into the smaller robing room for the next nine years. MPs met in the 'other place' for their first session on 24 June 1941. Officially, the move was a silent one, although some newspapers did report the new arrangements. Churchill took it all in his stride, confiding to his son that: 'I never thought to make speeches from those red benches, but I daresay I shall take to it.'[23]

As it turned out, the Lords was not so incongruous, proving a better venue for debate in some respects, than the old Commons. There was more light there than in the gloomy chamber where MPs had met since 1852. Translucent 'cathedral' glass temporarily replaced the destroyed stained glass, and shafts of natural light filled the room.[24] More space too. Although the Lords was exactly the same width as the old Commons (45ft), it felt wider, as there were fewer rows of benches on either side. The chamber was longer, too, by 12ft. Unlike the Commons, the Lords was more of a proscenium layout, with cross benches situated at the far end. There was one other notable difference, too. By design, the Lords had much smaller division lobbies. The two corridors for 'ayes' and 'noes' running along each side of the chamber were narrower than those in the Commons. In other words, the new home of the Commons was less conducive to two-party politics than its old one. The Speaker would later complain of the difficulty in controlling the longer chamber.[25] Conversely, in its temporary meeting place, the house of lords was packed tightly into a room measuring only 54ft by 37ft, with a lower ceiling. Contemporary depictions suggest that the Lords acquired the dense atmosphere lost by the Commons.[26]

The reporting of parliament was also enhanced by the emergency arrangements. Although restrictions were imposed on the media at Westminster during wartime, particularly around describing when and where parliament met, and during its secret sessions, parliamentary journalism was largely a beneficiary, not a casualty, of the war. At Church House, the gallery overlooking the 'Hoare Memorial Hall' provided room for a total of 77 reporters. Similarly, there was room made for the press in the gallery of the Lords, positioned over the dais usually occupied by the throne. In both temporary chambers – Church House and the house of lords – parliamentary correspondents now faced the Speaker, rather than looked

[22] *Manchester Guardian*, 15 May 1941, p. 3; Churchill Archive Centre, Churchill College Cambridge, Chartwell Papers, CHAR 20/21C/300–2: Churchill to Moyne, 22 June 1941.

[23] Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill. Vol. VI: Finest Hour*, 1104–5: Winston Churchill to Randolph Churchill, 8 June 1941; *Manchester Guardian*, 16 May 1941, p. 5; *Back-Bencher and Chairman*, 216–17 (secrecy); Sydney D. Bailey, 'Legislative Buildings of the World – IV. The Palace of Westminster', *Parliamentary Affairs*, iii (1949), 267 (robing room); John Battley, *A Visit to the Houses of Parliament* (1947), 30 (curtain).

[24] See Bryan de Grineau's depiction of the Commons' debate on the devaluation of the currency, 27–9 September, *Illustrated London News*, 8 Oct. 1949, pp. 544–5.

[25] Select Committee on House of Commons (rebuilding), *Report* (HC 1943–44, 109-i), pp. 22–3.

[26] See Bryan de Grineau's 'The House of Lords Sitting in the Robing Room, 1948', Parliamentary Art Collection, WOA 2532.

down on his back, meaning that they could take in a wider optic of the proceedings.[27] The Commons' debates were now more audible too. A sounding board was installed for the purposes of amplification in the Lords, with fixed and hanging microphones added later, to compensate for the larger auditorium. Wired for sound, the new chamber also welcomed the BBC. For the first time, the BBC now enjoyed the same access to Commons' reporting as the print media. Previously, its reporters were only allowed in to each sitting by special permission of the Speaker.[28] Taking advantage of this new status, the BBC began developing plans for a less formal style of reporting parliament, replacing the dry, verbatim record with commentary and 'colour', an innovation that turned into 'The week in Westminster'.[29] All this while the nation was at war.

Churchill, too, reaped some benefit from the making do and mending of the Commons. Church House was nicknamed 'Churchill's club', due to the much fuller suite of rooms given to the prime minister compared with those he used in the Palace of Westminster. Indeed, back in the palace, Colville complained of the longer journey he now had to make between the Lords and the PM's office.[30] With the reinforced 'annexe' to Number 10, Downing Street, the cabinet bunker on Whitehall, as well as Dollis Hill, the prime minister and his colleagues were now the most protected assets of the nation. Such priorities continued in peacetime. Enlarging the cabinet's footprint of space would become a priority in the rebuilt Commons, as we shall see.

There was one more evacuation plan for parliament made during wartime: to Park Lane Hotel on Piccadilly, another newish art deco building, this time with two basement levels, one of which would provide a temporary chamber for the Commons, larger than any auditorium in the palace or in Church House.[31] It proved unnecessary. On 24 April 1945, the Speaker of the house of commons, Douglas Clifton-Brown, switched on once more the beacon light over Big Ben. Details of the 'annex' arrangements at Church House, the temporary move to the Lords, and even the 'HK' plan for Stratford-upon-Avon, were revealed to the public. Nothing was said about Willesden College. Just as well maybe, as an enemy doodlebug fell nearby in September 1944 killing many residents.[32] The Palace of Westminster was back in business.

3. *Renewal*

The Commons required rebuilding. In October 1943, Churchill presented the coalition government's proposals for the reconstruction of the chamber. Setting up a Commons'

[27] PA, HC/SA/SJ/13/14 (Church House press arrangements): serjeant-at-arms to G.E. Christ, 14 July 1944; Baker, *House is Sitting*, 72–3.

[28] *Listener*, 14 Aug. 1947, p. 452.

[29] *Nicolson. Diaries and Letters*, 247–8: entry for 8 Oct. 1942; Quinton Hogg, *The Purpose of Parliament* (1946), 103–4. For parliament and broadcasting in general at this time, see Colin Seymour-Ure, 'Parliament and Mass Communications in the Twentieth Century', in *The House of Commons in the Twentieth Century*, ed. S.A. Walkland (Oxford, 1979), 537–9.

[30] Craven, *Church House Westminster*, 21; Colville, *Fringes of Power*, 352: entry for 24 June 1941.

[31] PA, HC/SA/SJ/13/14: 'Meeting at the Ministry of Works and Buildings', 29 Jan. 1941; J.Y. O'Brien to Charles Howard, 26 July 1941.

[32] Baker, *House is Sitting*, 86; *Manchester Guardian*, 26 Apr. 1945, p. 3; *The Times*, 8 Sept. 1944, p. 4.

committee to do the preparatory work, Churchill gave it precise instructions. Its remit would be to seek designs for a chamber that would be oblong and not semicircular, and with fewer seats than there were MPs. The first requirement served democracy. Churchill declared that 'in so many countries semicircular assemblies which have buildings which give to every Member, not only a seat to sit in but often a desk to write at, with a lid to bang, has proved fatal to Parliamentary Government as we know it here in its home and in the land of its birth'. The second requirement restored intimacy and the 'conversational style' to the Commons. MPs mostly loved what they heard Churchill say, queuing up to claim the oblong auditorium as an example of English genius, seeking a restitution of Barry's chamber (without the poor ventilation), and noting that the temporary accommodation in the Lords was too large. Modern experiments with rotunda shapes had not been a success, it was said: '[t]o address the London County Council', which met inside a marbled semicircular chamber in County Hall, completed in the 1930s, 'is to make a speech in a tomb'. However, there were dissenting voices, too, keen to break with convention. Earlier in 1943, Common Wealth had won its first seat in the Commons, the fourth independent MP elected during wartime. At one extreme was James Maxton, veteran of the Independent Labour Party. In the debate he called for parliament to start again and relocate somewhere away from London, 'built on a fine site, in good English parkland, as near to London as the kind of land can be got – some 20 miles out'. Others, including Nancy Astor and Viscount Hinchingbrooke, wanted to modernise the Commons' seating in such a manner as to reflect the diversity of parties and allegiance that had grown up since 1931.[33]

Churchill got his way, in so far as the 'select committee on house of commons (rebuilding)' was mandated to come up with a scheme for a traditional rectangular chamber. The decision to go for continuity over change looks on the face of it like a vindication of Churchill's commitment to parliamentary democracy and the traditions of parliament. Quintin Hogg, MP for Oxford and Churchill supporter, described his October speech as 'by far the most important of our constitutional system that has been made in years', a viewpoint echoed by other contemporary commentators quick to condemn the foreign innovations of the 'reformers' who wanted a French-style chamber of deputies.[34] In fact, Churchill had loaded the dice, and preset the terms of the select committee, expecting it to restore two-party politics by creating a structure, and, more importantly, an atmosphere, in the middle of the 20th century derived from the mid-Victorian era. Having said that, the committee was cross-party. Chaired by a maverick Conservative, Lord Winterton, and including the independent MP, Eleanor Rathbone (MP for the Combined Universities), the committee was not simply a rubber stamp. Churchill himself was not called to give evidence.[35] As the committee met through 1944, two more independent MPs successfully contested by-elections.

[33]Hansard, *Commons Debates*, 5th ser., cccxciii, col. 404 (Churchill); col. 411 (Maxton); col. 417 (Astor); col. 445 (Hinchingbrooke); col. 447 (tomb): 28 Oct. 1943.

[34]Hogg, *Purpose of Parliament*, 8; W.J. Brown, *Everybody's Guide of Parliament* (1945), 64–5; Alan Herbert, *The Point of Parliament* (1946), 34–8: 'reformers'; cf. Kevin Theakston, '"Part of the constitution": Winston S. Churchill and Parliamentary Democracy', *Finest Hour*, cxxxvi (2007), 30–6; Kevin Theakston, *Winston Churchill and the British Constitution* (2004), 135.

[35]Earl Winterton, *Orders of the Day* (1953), 300–1, 309. Churchill Archive Centre, Churchill College Cambridge, Chartwell Papers, CHAR20/138B/152–3: Churchill to Winterton, 6 Nov. 1944.

Winterton's committee mostly stuck to its brief as it set to work on rough outlines drawn up by Edward de Normann and his colleagues at the ministry of works. There was some disagreement over whether the plans for the chamber of the new Commons should look at increasing the overall number of seats for MPs, a compromise being that various options might be considered in the architects' plans. There would be no extension of the space between the two front benches, a *sine qua non* of the two-party system, not even by three inches. However, Eleanor Rathbone ensured that the committee did consider alternative seating plans, even within the very narrow terms of reference it had been given. She pressed Sir Gilbert Campion, clerk of the house of commons, on the rules around who could sit on the cross benches of the house of commons, situated on the public side of the bar of the Commons. Might these seats become home to independents, she enquired? Unhappy with his observation that independents were 'merely a passing phenomenon', Rathbone stuck to her ground. Campion was sent away to produce a memorandum on the cross benches. While by convention they had been reserved for MPs not yet sworn in, or for MPs wishing just to observe the debates but not speak, Campion conceded that they might be extended and used for other purposes, including for accommodating peers wishing to view proceedings.[36] It was not much of a concession, but Rathbone had made her point. By the beginning of April, the committee had completed its gathering of evidence, and tenders were invited, from which Giles Gilbert Scott's design was chosen as the recommended blueprint for the new house of commons. A small wooden model was made of the proposed chamber. By October his full designs were complete, the contractors lined up: Mowlem for all the stonework, and Oscar Faber as the consultant engineer for the reinforced steel and concrete framework of the new building.[37]

In January 1945, Churchill brought the committee's report back to the Commons, carrying on where his rhetoric had left off in 1943. To patriotism he now added a strong dose of partisanship, explaining that soon parliament would need to return to adversarial politics and regular whipped-in divisions. The temporary spell in the house of lords, he complained, had left the Commons 'short of the accommodation which we require to conduct heavy party fighting with the conveniences which were available in the other Chamber'. For the Labour Party, Frederick Pethick-Lawrence, a member of Winterton's committee, chimed in, lamenting just how long divisions had been taking in the house of lords. A conventional chamber was needed once more. In vain did John Dugdale, Labour MP for West Bromwich, protest that the decision to appoint Scott had been rushed, and styles other than gothic, for example the modernism of Gropius and Corbusier, could have been considered.[38] Oblong and gothic it was to be. As the Commons signed off on its new chamber, another committee, this time of both houses of parliament, met to consider the accommodation overall within the Palace of Westminster. Chaired by the former leader of the house of lords, Lord Stanhope, among other issues, the committee looked at ways to increase office accommodation in the palace, particularly for parliamentary staff and MPs. Clifton Brown, the Commons' Speaker, had his eye on the new spaces envisaged above the Commons chamber, while other witnesses giving evidence suggested turning over the Victoria Tower at the western end

[36] (HC 1943–44, 109-i), pp. 57–62.

[37] Stamp, 'Sir Giles Gilbert Scott and the Rebuilding of the House of Commons'.

[38] Hansard, *Commons Debates*, 5th ser., cdvii, cols 1005–6 (Churchill); col. 1048 (Pethick-Lawrence); cols 1076–7 (Dugdale): 25 Jan. 1945.

of the palace for full occupation, or for erecting a new building over Westminster Bridge, on a site then occupied by St Stephen's Club, a Conservative hang-out since the 1870s. In the end, in its report of March 1945, Stanhope's committee made several recommendations along these lines, opting for new buildings both on Bridge Street for parliamentary offices and along Abingdon Street beyond the Jewel Tower.[39]

By the close of the war, the old Commons chamber was still a demolition site, but plans to raise a new one from the ashes were in place. Those designs were dictated by necessity for reconstruction, but also by party pragmatism, by the need to reassert control. For the 1945 election demonstrated no let-up in the momentum behind breaking the two-party grip. Independent candidates experienced their best ever general election. Including the three nationalist parties, there were 149 independent candidates altogether, almost half the total put up by the Liberal Party, with over 20 returned, roughly equal to the combined presence of the Liberals and National Liberals. The electorate was in a breakaway mood – the 'movement away from party'. Fielding candidates in every constituency for the first time in its history, the Labour Party urged voters to avoid independent candidates, who would leave the Commons incapable of registering the decisive majorities required for its legislative programme.[40] In that aim, Labour and Conservative were of one mind, whatever else divided their views.

4. *Reconstruction*

Work on the new Commons chamber began on 10 May 1945, four years on from the bombing, and was completed five years later. Superficially, Scott's new Commons chamber reproduced Barry's Victorian building, the key dimensions and features exactly as before. The roof had been raised, which meant that, although there was no increase in floor space, there was additional room for galleries for the press and for visitors. The division lobbies had been widened. There was symbolism of nation and empire throughout. Much of the woodwork in the new chamber came from English oak, from Shropshire trees planted specially in 1943. As promised at the time of its destruction, the new Commons was furnished from Commonwealth countries. The Speaker's chair was made from black bean wood from Queensland, Australia; the clerks' table from Canadian oak, the entrance doors of oak from South Asia (one from India, one from Pakistan); the Bar-rail was made of Jamaican bronze; the dispatch boxes of puriri wood from New Zealand.[41] However, the most ingenious changes were around the new chamber, rather than within, in the provision of offices and meeting rooms, principally for ministers and whips. In Barry's chamber these had been scattered across the Palace of Westminster. Now, they were brought in closer proximity to the house of commons. Faber's innovative frame, the first of its kind in Britain, allowed the chamber to hang and to be wrapped around with rooms on either side, and below. There

[39] Joint Select Committee of the House of Lords and of the House of Commons appointed to enquire into the accommodation in the Palace of Westminster, *Report* (HL 1944–45, 10 26-1; HC 1944–45, 64-1, xvii.

[40] Fielding, 'The Second World War and Popular Radicalism'; Labour Party, *Let us Face the Future: A Declaration of Labour Policy for the Consideration of the Nation* (1945), available at *http://www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/man/lab45.htm* (accessed 18 Sept. 2016).

[41] PA, HC/SA/SJ/9/50: 'Gifts for the new House of Commons'; *Illustrated London News*, 28 Oct. 1950, pp. 690–1.

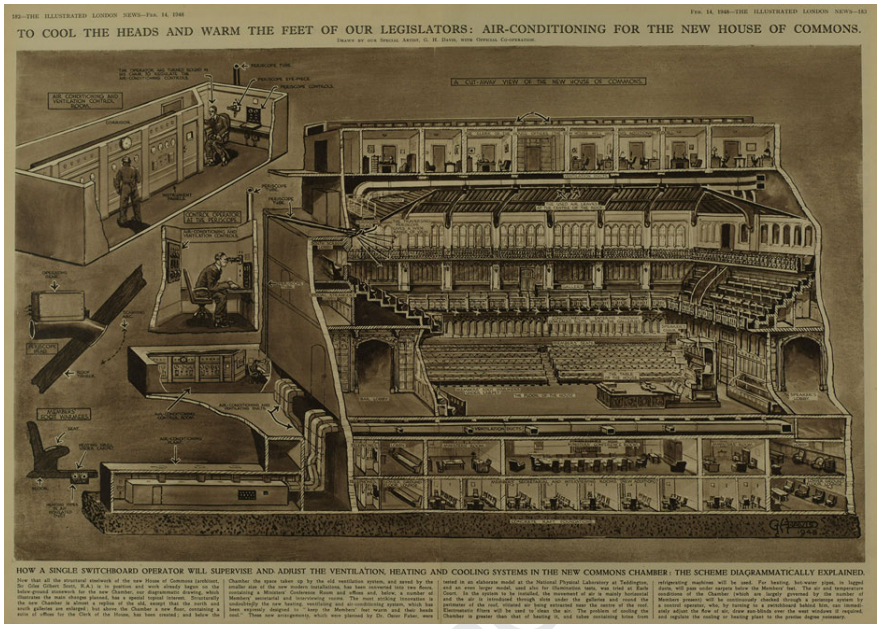

Figure 1: Cutaway diagram published in the *Illustrated London News*, 14 Feb. 1948, pp. 182–3. © Illustrated London News Historical Archive/Cengage Learning.

were now two new floors below, as David Reid's controversial ventilation system of the Victorian era was replaced by a more efficient one taking up less space. One of these new floors, directly under the Commons, was devoted to ministerial and whips' use, the second floor for MPs. Overall, in the refit, office and meeting space expanded by some 78%.[42]

Advances in technology were also hidden way from immediate view. The Commons chamber was now fitted out for amplification, with microphones inserted into the seating, so sensitive that one new MP in 1951 was able to hear the Speaker whispering to his clerks. A new electronic 'annunciator' was introduced to provide information about the day's business throughout the palace, and, crucially, to improve the summonsing of MPs to key divisions.[43]

The rebuilt Commons suited the resurgence of two-party control. The wartime coalition was one of the largest administrations to date. An American journalist counted 140 MPs under the direct charge of the Churchill-Attlee government, including all the ministers and parliamentary aides. Attlee's government formed in the summer of 1945 numbered 71. The phrase 'cabinet government' began to displace older notions of 'parliamentary government', coined in Victorian times. Attlee's new leader of the house of commons, Herbert Morrison, led the attack on antique parliamentary procedures that protected the sanctity of discussion and the rights of back-bench MPs, bringing back the government powers of 'guillotine'

[42] 'The new House of Commons', *Illustrated London News*, 21 Feb. 1948, pp. 564–5.

[43] *Illustrated London News*, 31 Dec. 1949; *The Backbench Diaries of Richard Crossman*, ed. Janet Morgan (1981), 39: entry for 30 Nov. 1951.

over debates and stalled legislation. Veterans of parliament, including Campion, regretted the change of temper.[44] By 1950, the process was complete. Independents were eclipsed at the election of 1950, more or less a straight fight between the Conservative and Labour Parties.[45] At the end of that year, this new intake entered a chamber recalibrated for such a contest. In May 1951, the Lords returned to its home, its windows and roof repaired, new microphones and loudspeakers added, and the woolsack and throne reinstated.

Fear of the bomb did not go away with the end of hostilities. Secret planning to protect parliament in the event of enemy attack continued after the war. In August 1945, shortly after atomic bombs were dropped over Japan, the Attlee government decided to suspend civil defence for the nation at large. However, the 'houses of parliament civil defence committee', chaired by Victor Goodman, one of the clerks, carried on its business into the early 1950s. Largely responsible for co-ordinating Air Raid Precautions at the Palace of Westminster during the war, the committee now turned its attention to evacuation plans in the event of atomic attack. On 2 November 1949, two months after the Soviet Union successfully tested an H-bomb, Goodman met with the home secretary, Chuter Ede, as well as other parliamentary officials, and de Normann from the ministry of works, to discuss options for erecting 'citadel protection for a small chamber' capable of accommodating an average attendance of the Commons. The main difficulty in such a scheme, noted the meeting, was keeping it out of the public eye, especially if a large slice of taxpayers' money was required for its finance. A solution was suggested: bury the 'citadel' deep in the basement of the new buildings going up on the north side of Abingdon Street, at the corner of Great College Street, just a few hundred yards away from the palace. The whole row of 18th-century houses there had been destroyed in the blitz, and a new block, purpose built for parliamentary use – offices and meetings rooms – was now filling the cleared site. Where better to hide away a bunker for MPs than underneath their new home. Significantly, it was assumed that party politics would carry on underground. Charles Howard, the serjeant-at-arms, was directed, in particular, to look at ways of recording MPs' votes without the division lobbies, for which there would be no room.[46] With the approval of Attlee's cabinet, later confirmed when Churchill returned to office in 1951, Goodman's committee met on several more occasions, working on a 'first phase' to move both the Commons and the Lords to temporary accommodation within the palace in the event of war, and a 'second phase', taking both Houses into the 'deep shelter' across the way. Momentous as these plans may seem, Goodman's committee hardly worked with alacrity, mainly because the ministry of works delayed over completing the required surveys and costings.[47] By 1952, the committee had wound up its affairs, and the 'citadel' scheme disappeared from the record. Britain by then

[44] Albert Viton, 'The British Parliament in Total War', *Virginia Quarterly Review*, xxi (1945), 24. Front and opposition bench figures are taken from *The Times Guide to the House of Commons 1945* (1945), 3–6; cf. John P. Mackintosh, *The British Cabinet* (1962); Hans Daalder, *Cabinet Reform in Britain, 1914–63* (Stanford, CA, 1953); Gilbert Campion, 'Parliamentary Procedure, Old and New', in *Parliament: A Survey*, ed. Gilbert Campion (1952), 157.

[45] For the re-emergence of party, see Andrew Thorpe, *Parties at War. Political Organisation in Second World War Britain* (Oxford, 2009),

[46] PA, VGO/2/1: 'Protection for parliament in wartime', 2 Nov. 1949. For the Attlee government decision in 1945, see TNA, CAB 128/1: 23 Aug. 1945.

[47] PA, VGO/2/2: 'Minutes of the 7th meeting of the Defence Committee, Houses of Parliament', 27 Nov. 1951; VGO/2/2: 'Civil defence: Executive Officer's report (27 November 1951–4 February 1952)'.

had its own bomb, and the acceleration of nuclear weapons technology by the USA had tilted the balance of cold war firepower back to the NATO alliance. Protecting parliament fell down the list of national priorities. Indeed, parliament now needed protection at street level, not below. Later in the decade, policemen in Parliament Square looked on as tens of thousands of CND protesters filed past the Palace of Westminster en route up Whitehall to Trafalgar Square at the end of the famous Aldermaston marches.

5. *Conclusion*

Breaking with tradition, the house of commons assembled in St Stephen's Hall on 15 August 1945, for the state opening of parliament by the king, who gave his address from the throne in the Lords chamber, returned to the upper House just for the day. St Stephen's was fitted out for the occasion in the usual style of the Commons, with green seating on either side, and a temporary Speaker's chair and clerks' table placed at the western end. Later that day, Clifton Brown, the Speaker, pointed out to the Commons an interesting coincidence. One-hundred-and-eleven years earlier to the day, MPs had sat in the original St Stephen's Chapel for what proved the last time before the fire which destroyed the old palace two months later in October 1834.[48] It was a neat touch. Parliament likes reminders of its antiquity, the principle of precedent, and the comfort of continuity. Parliament returned to work in peacetime in a fit of nostalgia for the old ways, trumpeted in a new range of guides to the houses of parliament, and in the foundation of the Hansard Society in 1947. Yet, throughout the 1940s, as this essay has described, the Palace of Westminster experienced anything but continuity in its proceedings. In the space of 13 years, the Commons met in four different chambers, with contingency plans for three other emergency alternatives. The Commons oversaw the war from the 'other place', then, just as the whigs had done after 1834, Attlee's government delivered an age of reform from the house of lords. Time spent in Church House and in the house of lords reminded the Commons of what it missed about Barry's chamber. At the same time, two-party politics was challenged by independent MPs wanting a different way of doing business. Reconstructing the Commons after the war was both an act of restoration and of invention, as Churchill and his successors sought to reshape parliamentary politics to their own ends.

[48] *The Times*, 16 Aug. 1945, p. 4. There is a photograph of St Stephen's Hall readied for the state opening in Fell, *The Houses of Parliament*